

THE DOLPHIN DYNASTY

San Francisco's tradition-rich Dolphin Club seems to be treading in hot water lately.

By Kevin Nelson

Nobody talks much about the Dolphin Club these days. Oh, occasionally their name pops into the news. It's usually during winter, when some of their older members launch into the Bay for the famous Polar Bear swim, and a TV station or newspaper needs a human-interest story about eccentric San Franciscans. But that's about it. Their other note of newsworthiness, the persistent controversy over the best way to reconcile private interest with public shoreline use, is mostly ignored.

It is easy to see why one might overlook the Dolphin Swim and Boat Club. Amidst the commercial hubbub that constantly engulfs the Wharf,

their headquarters at the bottom of Hyde Street is an unassuming site. They have nothing to sell. Squashed between other nondescript wooden buildings, their plain brown building bears the lettering, "Founded in 1877." With old steam and sailing ships providing background, the Club seems a flimsy, anachronistic relic of the past.

The story of the Dolphins is a min-history of the development of the San Francisco shoreline around Fisherman's Wharf. In 1877, a group of exercise-minded German immigrants met at the foot of Jones Street, in Mrs. Kelly's Cove. This cove, part of a chain of natural curves and inlets, extended from Powell Street to Leavenworth. When

the harbor boomed in the 1880's, dock space became crucial. To make room for the overwhelming number of cargo and passenger ships that would drop anchor in the Bay, land-fill began. Soon the Dolphin Club found itself beached on interior land.

Intrepidly, they moved to the base of Van Ness Street. Here they built, at a cost of \$1800, the building that (since moved) stands for the most part as their headquarters today. By 1925, Van Ness was extended by fill and the Dolphins came up dry again, this time relocating on Polk. Only in recent years, through bargaining with private groups like the Southern Pacific and land donations by the State, has the City gained full jurisdiction over Aquatic Park. When the federal W.P.A. decided to build a maritime museum in 1938, the Dolphins obediently packed up to their present address. As a sidenote, the sand along Aquatic Park came from the excavations that created the Union Square Garage three years later.

You see, the Dolphins are an aquatic club. They like to swim. They like to row boats. They want to be next to water. Their purposes are sportive and have always been so, and that is why they keep bumping heads with people who have other ideas for the shoreline.

The jousting continues. In September the Wharf's \$14 million reconstruction program began in earnest, with the removal of the rotted ferry slips of Hyde Street Pier. Some 600 feet of deck and piling is being razed to make way for 350 new fishing boat berths. This section will in turn be protected by a \$10 million breakwater constructed by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.



The Dolphin Club at the foot of Hyde Street since 1877.

John Wieland, owner of a long-time San Francisco brewery, donated the first oarboat to the Dolphins in 1887. This seaworthy vessel, long and sturdy like a Viking cruiser, has a special niche in club lore. Many remember rowing to Candlestick in it, when the Giants first came to town. There they'd meet the wives, watch the game, then hop back into the boat for a late afternoon row back to Aquatic Park. By that time the wives would have steaks sizzling on a bayfront barbecue.

Although rowing on the Bay has become largely recreational, its origins were serious and pointed. When schooners sailed through the Golden Gate in the 1890's, there was sharp competition to supply them with their port-time needs. Usually, no prior contracts were established to supply food or make repairs. Ships accepted bids from private outfits on a first-come, first-serve basis. In order to be first, teams of men worked together. One man sat on Telegraph Hill watching for incoming ships. When he sighted one, he flashed directions by mirror to partners waiting on shore.

Then the race was on! Like enraged Charons, men like Tom Crowley rowed unsinkable Whitehalls to be quickest with their bids.

From these romantic beginnings Dolphin rowing has ventured to Lake Merced. College graduates and policemen wanting to stay in shape compete auspiciously with the hulls of Bay Area colleges in the Pacific Association of Amateur Oarsmen. The Bay has long been considered too choppy and crowded for competitive rowing. The rowing done nowadays is in support of swimmers.

Swimmers and swimming! Here Dolphin history shines, especially in the province of long-distance ocean swimming. Their lounge is filled with the ribbons, medals, trophies, press clippings and photos of past achievements. The grandeur goes as far back as the Club, but the unquestioned heyday was the 1960's. In a sport that rivals mountain climbing for audacity and physical punishment, Dolphin swimmers would first dream it, then do it.

In 1965 Ted Ericksen became

Continued Next Page

Dolphins

From Page 9

the first man to make a double-crossing of the English Channel, from England to France and back again. (In September, 19-year old Canadian Cindy Nicholas broke Erickson's son's record of the swim by a very unladylike 10 hours). A year later Dave Smith swam the 13-mile straits of Gibraltar. Closer to home, Fred Rogers churned the length of Lake Tahoe while Mike Garibaldi looped the 3.2 miles around Alcatraz in 1 hour 14 minutes.

During this time Dolphin eyes stretched to the Farallon Islands. Of those who tried the 36-mile distance to Aquatic Park, most failed. Hawaiian Ike Papke stopped 1½ miles short of Stinson Beach. Ted Erickson was pulled from the water twice. Finally, Army Lieutenant Colonel Stu Evans became the first and only man to swim the full distance. Not to be outdone, the redoubtable Mr. Erickson came back a third time to clock a record from the Farallones to the Golden Gate Bridge. Because ocean conditions vary so severely, times are deceptive. Still, Dolphins remain proudest of their 6-man Farallones effort of 14 hrs., 36 min.

In all the years of ocean swimming there has been only one fatality. This is remarkable when the special dangers and hardships of the sport are considered. In the fall of 1963 James Small and Jim Baird were near the end of their Sausalito-Aquatic Park swim, sponsored

by the Dolphin Club. Small breathed on his right side, Baird on his left. This odd fact allowed Baird to see an approaching fishing boat, stuck on automatic pilot. He ducked and dove in time, while Small had no such chance. Both of Small's legs were severed and he died in a hospital three days later.

As is so often the case, tragedy provoked safety measures which could easily have been instituted beforehand. Bay swims are well protected now. At least one Coast Guard support ship travels alongside. Boats inside the Bay, and those expected to enter on the day of the event, are forewarned. Each swimmer must wear an orange fluorescent bathing cap and one oarboat is required for every three participants. So sensible in hindsight, the crew must carry warning whistles, wear fluorescent vests and raise a flag when swimmers are in water.

As befits its age, the Club is cantankerous and eccentric. 84-year old Wally Smith, a member since 1916, calls the Club most every summer morning and snarls, "What's the weather like down there?" When the reply is encouraging, Smith catches the bus and comes and swims. Lawton Hughes, initiated in 1919 for 50¢ (today's fee is \$50, with a waiting list of nine months), is the present treasurer. Born and raised here, Hughes's family lived at the corner of Geary and Leavenworth Streets in 1906. When earthquake fires decimated their home, his family moved into the back of a pickup truck. They parked the truck for three months in the National Cemetery at the Presidio, where an understanding uncle was caretaker.

Before Jack LaLanne attempts some prodigious endurance feat, he consults the sages at the Club

about tides. Sylvia Cox and John Fairfax, who rowed eleven months in a 35-foot boat to reach Australia from here, trained out of the Dolphin Club. According to President Frank Drum, people who swim the Bay are "all crazy. But besides that, they represent the whole gamut of society: longshoremen, teamsters, lawyers, women, retirees, bankers, doctors, the unemployed, everybody."

Certainly, at the very least, Bay swimmers step to the beat of a different drummer. Water temperature never exceeds 63 degrees in the summer and usually languishes at a cool 50. Shark fins occasionally circle about, and the tides and rough swells can make for a salty mouthful. Yet enthusiasm has never been higher. Club-spon-

sored races and training courses, at any time of year, are at capacity for the amount of support manpower and available boats. The Golden Gate Swim, staged annually in September since 1917, is an arduous 1-mile swim from Fort Point to Lime Rock. Over 60 swimmers finished the event this year. Fifteen of them were women.

The Polar Bear swim is the most famous Dolphin activity. Marking the first day of winter every year, Dolphins from ages 12 to 80 make a pilgrimage to the sea. While publicized as a

one-time affair, the F..... is actually a series of swims. In the manner of Gallic comitatus, willing members pledge to swim eight miles per month during the winter, "come rain or hurricane, with no fudging." Their goal accomplished, Dolphins celebrate at an awards banquet. Considering the age of some of the participants, the Polar Bear swim would appear to be a rather serious affair. Lawton Hughes is reassuring, however. "Most everyone is in pretty good shape," he says. "There's been a few heart attacks and a couple've died in the shower, but swimming in the Bay always works out okay."

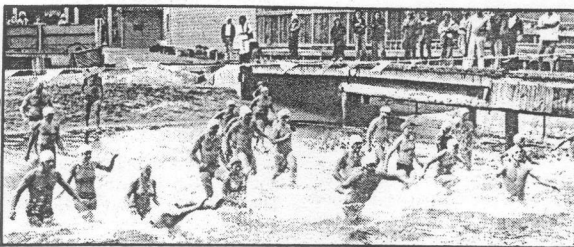
All this is very nice, say others. Certain facts remain. The Dolphin Club and its compatriot aquatic club, the South End

against the clubs. After three years of wrangling, the Dolphins admitted women at the start of this year. From an active membership of 400, the Club has 40 female members. The next source of contention became facilities. How can there be equality of membership without equal facilities? In late summer the Dolphins began building separate showers and locker rooms for women. Convinced of the sincerity of effort, Marilyn Rodman withdrew her court action against the Club in September.

Still, the issues grow. Sandra Terzian-Feliz, a native San Franciscan, has worked on the legal case versus the clubs for over a year. "We have no beef about the legal traditions of the clubs. That's not the problem. When the state originally donated the land, they specified that it be used for public recreational purposes. That land is for everybody's use. The clubs have no authority to say, 'We don't like you, you can't use the beach.'"

As Ms. Terzian-Feliz envisions, the clubs would remain private, while opening their doors on a fee per-use basis. The Dolphins and South End remain adamant. Their traditions are strong. They help supervise the only safe ocean/bay swimming area in San Francisco. They argue convincingly that this is largely due to the fact that there are swimmers there. Also, the surest measure of the water quality of the Bay is by the people who swim in it. The Dolphins say that the Bay is "cleaner now than in years."

Given the opportunity to swim, would the public take advantage? Or, the Dolphin core diffused and scattered, would another recreational outlet be eliminated from a part of town that is in great need of them? The knotty question continues: how is the public served? •



Behind the Dolphin Club, these orange-capped members partake in a competitive swim in the Bay.

Photo by Don Melandry

Rowing Club, are private. (The other longstanding club in Aquatic Park is the San Francisco Rowing Club. It is virtually defunct now and its building has become unsafe for public occupancy.) Though the shoreline of the Marina and Aquatic Park are open to the public, the sand and athletic facilities of the two clubs cater to a restricted clientele.

Since their inception, the clubs have been an exclusively male preserve. In 1974 a civil rights suit to compel female membership was brought